DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 323 424 CG 022 746

AUTHOR Jazwinski, Christine H.; And Others
TITLE Attribution of Sexism: Effects of Supervisor Gender and Similarity of Co-Workers' Experiences.
PUB DATE May 90
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Midwestern Psychological Association (59th, Chicago, IL, May 7-9, 1987).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Attribution Theory; College Students; *Employee Attitudes; *Employer Employee Relationship; Higher Education; Perception; Predictor Variables; Role Playing; *Sex Bias; Sex Discrimination; Simulation; *Supervisors; Work Environment
IDENTIFIERS Nepotism

ABSTRACT

Perceptions of supervisor bias can profoundly affect employee morale, yet the perceiver usually infers bias from limited information. In this study, 95 male and female undergraduate students participated in groups of 2 to 5 for course credit, playing the role of middle-level managers working in the personnel department of a fictitious company composed of 700 employees. Participants were asked to evaluate the files of four female employees, and to rate the supervisor's categorical and personal bias. Two dimensions for the classification of bias were proposed: facilitation (e.g. nepotism, "old boys club") versus hindrance (e.g. personal dislike, sexism); and personal (e.g. personal dislike, nepotism) versus categorical (e.g. sexism, "old boys club"). Based on attribution theory, it was anticipated that an unfavorable promotion recommendation, evidence of high employee ability, male supervisor gender, and consensus about the similarity of co-workers experiences would predict attributions of hindrance bias to the employee's supervisor. It was also predicted that judgments of categorical bias would be more strongly influenced by consensus information than would judgments of personal bias. All predictions, except those relating evidence of high ability to perception of bias, were confirmed. Results demonstrate the utility of attribution theory for the study of perceived bias. (Author/TE)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED323424

Presented at Midwestern Psychological Association
Chicago, May 1990
May be cited without authors' permission.

Attribution of Sexism: Effects of Supervisor Gender and Similarity of Co-Workers' Experiences

Christine H. Jazwinski, Sandra L. Brennen, and Alfred G. Frenette
St. Cloud State University

Abstract

Perceptions of supervisor bias can profoundly impact employee morale. When do people consider an evaluator biased? Complete data are almost never available. The perceiver usually infers bias from limited information. Two dimensions for the classification of bias were proposed: (1) *facilitation* (e.g., nepotism, "old boys club") vs. *hindrance* (e.g., personal dislike, sexism), (2) *personal* (e.g., personal dislike, nepotism) vs. *categorical* (e.g., sexism, "old boys club"). Based on attribution theory, we anticipated that an unfavorable promotion recommendation, evidence of high employee ability, male supervisor gender, and similarity consensus of co-workers' experiences would predict attributions of hindrance bias to the employee's supervisor. It was predicted that judgments of categorical bias would be more strongly influenced by consensus information than would judgments of personal bias. Participants played the role of middle-level managers and reviewed the promotion files of four female employees. All predictions, except those relating evidence of high ability to perception of bias, were confirmed. Results demonstrate the utility of attribution theory for the study of perceived bias.

CG 022746

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☒ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Alfred G Frenrette

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Introduction

When do people consider an evaluator sexist or otherwise biased? Evaluations are not always fair. Ideally, evaluations should accurately reflect performance. Evaluation criteria should be consistently applied to everyone. When performance and evaluations correspond, employees are likely to improve their performance. However, when evaluations are perceived as unfair, decreased work motivation is a likely consequence. Employees may come to believe that their outcomes are uncontrollable.

Biased evaluations may entail the use of irrelevant personal characteristics, or general attributes such as gender, age, and ethnicity. Two types of bias can be distinguished. One, *personal bias*, consists of inappropriately harsh or lenient treatment based on an individual's personal characteristics or relationship with an evaluator. The second, *categorical bias*, is the result of a person's social category membership. For example, sexism is unfair treatment based on gender. The distinction between personal and categorical bias is comparable to the difference between person and social categories described by Fiske and Taylor (1984).

Theoretically, bias can work either in favor or against the object of evaluation. Biased evaluations are unfair evaluations, either because they are too lenient or too harsh. We will term bias which entails an unfairly lenient evaluation *facilitation bias* (e.g., favoritism). Unfairly harsh evaluation will be termed *hindrance bias* (e.g., sexism).

In recent years, women and minorities have begun to enter new sectors of the job market. Concern over racism and sexism has increased. There is substantial evidence of bias in the work place (e.g., wage gap analyses). Women and minorities do face significant advancement barriers (Betz & Fitzgerald, 1987). There is no question that categorical and personal bias exist and impact performance evaluations. However, little is known about the psychological processes that mediate perceptions of bias. What informational cues do people draw on to infer bias?

Perceptions of bias are practically as important as actual bias. If evaluations are fair, but employees perceive them as biased, they will act as if they are. The present research will examine informational predictors of perceived bias.

Bias as an Attribution

When dealing with an individual case of favorable or unfavorable evaluation, the perceiver must infer bias on the basis of limited information. Bias implies unfair treatment of one individual as compared to another, based on personal or categorical characteristics. In order to unequivocally pinpoint the existence of bias, other relevant performance dimensions would have to be equal or at least highly comparable. Unfortunately, complete performance data are almost never available. Many relevant dimensions are not comparable or easily quantifiable. As a result, the perceiver must rely on other cues.

The most obvious piece of information is the evaluation itself. When an employee receives a negative evaluation, it may serve as the basis for the inference of personal or categorical hindrance bias. When a positive evaluation is received the perceiver may infer facilitation bias.

It is expected that, when no other information is available, the perceiver will be more likely to infer personal than categorical bias. Personal bias is associated with a particular individual. Categorical bias is associated with a larger number of people: members of a social category. Therefore, to infer categorical bias, the perceiver must generalize from the individual case to the social category. Such generalization requires more information.

Effects of Ability

Ability is a major determinant of successful performance on difficult tasks. Able individuals are expected to succeed, where others fail. A negative performance evaluation, given to an employee with credentials indicative of high ability, raises eyebrows. On the other hand, a negative evaluation of an employee with weak credentials is not surprising.

Unexpected outcomes are more likely to be attributed to external causes (e.g., evaluator bias) than are expected outcomes. Therefore, one would predict that high ability coupled with a negative performance evaluation would lead to attribution of hindrance bias. When failure (negative evaluation) is expected (weak credentials), but the actual outcome is success, the perceiver may attribute facilitation bias. On the other hand, failure when failure is expected (and success when success is expected) is less likely to lead to attribution of bias.

Support for an expectancy framework of perceived bias was obtained by Jazwinski, Hudson, & Scilley (1989). Jazwinski, et al. found that the most sexism was attributed to a male supervisor when the female employee denied promotion was described as both very able and possessing an excellent past record. High ability and excellent past performance are linked to expectancy of success.

Consensus and Social Comparison

Kelley's cube theory of attribution specifies consensus information as relevant to the attribution of causality (Jones & McGillis, 1976). Consensus information is an indicator of the similarity of other people's experiences or behaviors to the individual case at hand. When explaining the causes of an individual's outcome, knowledge that others have experienced similar outcomes shifts the locus of causality from internal to external.

When considering the social interaction between supervisor and employee, high consensus of co-workers' outcomes (others have received similar evaluations) corresponds to low distinctiveness of the supervisor's evaluations (e.g., the supervisor has given negative evaluations to other employees). With high consensus of co-workers' outcomes, attribution of causality for a particular performance outcome will be external to the employee. The corresponding low

distinctiveness of the supervisor's evaluations, is likely to result in an attribution internal to the supervisor.

Consensus information relative to the employee may vary with regard to similarity of the comparison group. If the comparison group of employees is highly similar to the target employee, then consensus information may have greater impact on attributions. One dimension of similarity consists of social category membership. Jazwinski, et al. (1989) found that both information regarding the similar plight (high consensus) of peer women (high similarity) and information regarding the good fortune (low consensus) of peer men (low similarity) were equally effective in increasing attributions of sexism to the male supervisor of a female employee who had been denied promotion. The male supervisor was perceived as more sexist when participants learned either that there were male employees who had received support and encouragement from the supervisor, or that there were female employees who had experienced a lack of support.

Two types of bias have been specified: personal and categorical. Attribution of categorical bias involves a broader generalization. With personal bias, the perceiver is concluding that an evaluation was based on some characteristic irrelevant to performance. With categorical bias, the perceiver is concluding that an evaluation was based on social category membership. This implies that all category members could be subject to biased evaluations. Therefore, the greater the consensus of experiences of comparable others, the greater the sample of category members that an inference of bias can be based on. Because of the difference in generality between personal and categorical bias, the predicted effect of consensus information should vary. Consensus information is expected to have a greater impact on attributions of categorical bias than on attributions of personal bias.

Social Category Membership

Can women be biased against women? Although the literature on sex role stereotyping has demonstrated that they can (Lochel, 1983), common beliefs may contradict this fact. With historically unequal distribution of social status and power by gender, men more than women have had the opportunity to discriminate against women. When we think of sexism, we usually imagine a man discriminating against a woman. It is predicted that categorical hindrance bias (female recipient) is more likely to be attributed to a male than to a female evaluator. Similar gender differences are not predicted for personal hindrance bias.

The present investigation examined attributions of categorical and personal facilitation and hindrance bias. Participants played the role of middle-level managers working in the personnel department of a large company. In-baskets containing information about four female employees were processed. Participants received information about the employees' success or failure (promotion recommendation), their supervisor's gender, the employees' level of ability

(strength of credentials) and the similarity of co-workers' experiences (consensus information).

Method

Subjects/Procedure

Ninety-five male and female undergraduate students participated in groups of two to five for course credit. Participants played the role of middle-level managers working in the personnel department of a fictitious company (Datronics) composed of 700 employees. The purpose of the study, as described to participants, was to examine attitudes towards professional development and advancement. Participants were told that they would be evaluating company policies and procedures for fairness and appropriateness. These policies and procedures had recently come under critical scrutiny. Participants were told that because Datronics consists of 14 independent departments headed by different supervisors, there was the possibility of inequities among the departments in the application of promotion procedures.

Participants were asked to evaluate the files of four female employees. A variety of materials descriptive of each employee was first viewed, then a questionnaire assessing attributions for the employee's performance (ability), and ratings of bias and incompetence of the supervisor was filled out. Participants rated the supervisor's categorical and personal facilitation and hindrance bias on seven-point Likert scales. Following each employee evaluation, participants were asked to provide their opinions regarding various company policies (e.g., resource allocation towards employee development programs). Policy evaluations played the role of filler tasks.

Materials and Design

Participants accessed information about employees and company policies from in-baskets. Each basket contained a set of materials, in folders, descriptive of four employees, and three filler tasks. Information pertaining to each employee consisted of a performance evaluation form signed by the employee's supervisor, a resume, and a written informal dialogue between the stimulus employees' co-workers at the company cafeteria (in that order). Order of employees was controlled using randomized counterbalancing.

Files pertaining to the four stimulus employees made up factorial combinations of Promotion Recommendation, manipulated via the performance evaluation form (favorable vs. unfavorable), and Supervisor Gender. There were also two between-subjects factors: Employee Credentials manipulated via resume content (strong, no resume/control, weak) and Consensus (high consensus, no information control, low consensus). Consensus was manipulated via the informal cafeteria dialogue. The dialogue either indicated that the employee's female co-workers were having numerous problems with their supervisor (same person as the target employee's boss), had positive experiences with their supervisor, or no information was provided about their experiences with the supervisor.

Results and Discussion

Correlations

Pearson correlations were computed between ratings of categorical hindrance bias (sexism), personal hindrance bias, categorical facilitation bias, personal facilitation bias, and ratings of supervisor competence, separately for the four within-subjects conditions (male supervisor/unfavorable recommendation, male supervisor/favorable recommendation, female supervisor/unfavorable recommendation, female supervisor/favorable recommendation). As can be seen in Tables 1 through 4, hindrance bias (both categorical and personal) was negatively

---

Insert Tables 1 through 4 about here

---

correlated with ratings of supervisor competence, but facilitation bias was not. The higher the ratings of hindrance bias, the lower the ratings of supervisor competence. The patterns of correlations between the dependent variables were similar in the Female Supervisor/Favorable Promotion Recommendation condition and the Male Supervisor/Unfavorable Promotion Recommendation Condition. In both these conditions, there were positive correlations between the two forms of hindrance bias (categorical and personal), and between the two forms of facilitation bias (categorical and personal). However, as one would expect, there were insignificant correlations between facilitation and hindrance bias. Surprisingly, in the Male Supervisor/Favorable Promotion Recommendation Condition, there were significant positive correlations between facilitation and hindrance bias. It is possible that in this condition, some of the participants were inferring hindrance bias from the male gender of the supervisor while at the same time inferring facilitation bias from the favorable promotion recommendation.

Sexism (Categorical Hindrance Bias)

Data were analyzed using 3X3X2X2 ANOVA. Only the results for hindrance bias will be reported in this paper. Subjects inferred sexism (categorical hindrance bias) on the basis of both Promotion Recommendation (main effect, $F(1,86) = 20.47$, $p<.0001$) and Supervisor Gender (main effect, $F(1,86) = 28.05$, $p<.0001$). More bias was attributed when the promotion recommendation was unfavorable than when it was favorable. Male supervisors were rated as more sexist than female supervisors. These two main effects were qualified by a Supervisor Gender x Promotion Recommendation x Consensus interaction ($F(2,86)=9.689$, $p<.0001$). The means are presented in Figure 1.

Insert Figure 1 about here

It can be seen that sexism was more likely to be attributed to male supervisors who gave unfavorable promotion recommendations, particularly when other employees also reported problems. As could be expected from Kelley's cube theory of attribution (Jones & McGillis, 1976), promotion recommendation information had the greatest effect under high consensus (low distinctiveness of supervisor behavior) conditions. With low distinctiveness of supervisor behavior, participants made more extreme attributions to the male and female supervisor, on the basis of performance outcome (both Newman-Keuls comparisons, $p<.01$). Comparing the effects for the female supervisor, one can see that the pattern of means was the same as for male supervisor, but the effects of Consensus Information and Promotion Recommendation were weaker. As predicted, overall participants were less likely to attribute sexism to a female supervisor.

Surprisingly, no effects were obtained for Employee Credentials. It was predicted that greater sexism would be attributed to a supervisor denying promotion to employees with strong credentials. However, this effect was not obtained, even though a manipulation check showed that credentials significantly influenced ratings of employee ability in the expected direction ($F(2,86) = 32.73$, $p<.0001$). An earlier experiment by Jazwinski, et al. (1989) had shown that strong credentials and an excellent past record increased attributions of sexism to male supervisors denying women promotion. However, in the earlier experiment participants read vignettes in which they were explicitly informed of the employee's strong credentials and excellent record. In the present experiment, a more realistic procedure was used with resumes. Perhaps the greater informational complexity of the experimental setting prevented the student participants from integrating the resume information into their evaluative ratings. The same constraining effect may not be a factor with practised evaluators.

Personal Hindrance Bias

Ratings of personal hindrance bias showed a main effect of Promotion Recommendation ($F(1,86) = 121.14$, $p<.0001$), with higher ratings of bias in the unfavorable (4.69) than in the favorable condition (2.543). There was also a Promotion Recommendation x Consensus interaction ($F(2,86) = 10.81$, $p<.0001$). As can be seen in Figure 2, both the high consensus and the control condition

---

Insert Figure 2 about here

---

produced relatively extreme ratings of bias. In both of these conditions, participants inferred greater bias, when the recommendation was unfavorable rather than favorable (Newman-Keuls comparisons, $p<.01$). As was expected, consensus information had weaker effects on attributions of personal bias, as

compared to categorical bias. Participants were as likely to infer personal hindrance bias in the control condition (with no consensus information) as they were in the high consensus and low consensus conditions (Newman-Keuls comparisons, $p>.01$).

Supervisor Competence

Ratings of supervisor competence showed a main effect of Promotion Recommendation ($F(1,86) = 50.2$, $p<.0001$). Supervisors giving favorable promotion recommendations were rated as more competent (5.01) than those giving unfavorable promotion recommendations (3.874). There was also a significant Promotion Recommendation x Consensus interaction ($F(2,86) = 75.36$, $p<.0001$). As can be seen in Figure 3, high consensus led to the most extreme

---

Insert Figure 3 about here

---

attributions. As was predicted on the basis of Kelley's cube theory, under conditions of high consensus (low distinctiveness of supervisor behavior), a favorable recommendation led to high ratings of competence, while an unfavorable recommendation led to low ratings of competence.

Conclusions

The present experiment demonstrates the utility of attribution theory for providing an understanding of how perceivers infer bias from limited informational cues. Perceivers utilized information regarding gender and the favorability of evaluations. Attributions of bias are also enhanced by the availability of information regarding the similar plight of an employee's peers (consensus information). Ratings of hindrance bias (but not facilitation bias) were negatively correlated with ratings of supervisor competence. Future research will need to clarify the conceptual distinctions between different types of bias (personal vs. categorical, and facilitation vs. hindrance).

References

Betz, N. E., & Fitzgerald, L. F. (1987). The career psychology of women. Orlando: Academic Press.

Fiske, S. T., & Taylor, S. E. (1984). Social cognition. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.

Jazwinski, C. H., Hudson, B. L., & Scilley, K. (1989). Judgments of sexism on the job: An attributional model, Chicago, Midwestern Psychological Association.

Jones, E. E., & McGillis, D. (1976). Correspondent inferences and the attribution cube: A comparative reappraisal. In J. H. Harvey, W. J. Ickes, & R. F. Kidd (Eds.), New directions in attribution research, Vol. 1. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Lochel, E. (1983). Sex differences in achievement motivation. In J. Jaspars, F. D. Fincham, & M. Hewstone (Eds.), Attribution theory and research: conceptual, developmental, and social dimensions. London: Academic Press.

Table 1:. Correlations Between Variables in the Male Supervisor/Unfavorable Promotion Recommendation Condition

	Categorical Hindrance	Personal Hindrance	Categorical Facilitation	Personal Facilitation	Supervisor Competence
Categorical Hindrance	X	.62***	.203	.215	-.587***
Personal Hindrance		X	.066	.103	.-372***
Categorical Facilitation			X	.568***	-.205
Personal Facilitation				X	-.093
Supervisor Competence					X

Note. *** p<.001
** p<.01

Table 2: Correlations Between Variables in the Male Supervisor/Favorable Promotion Recommendation Condition

	Categorical Hindrance	Personal Hindrance	Categorical Facilitation	Personal Facilitation	Supervisor Competence
Categorical Hindrance	X	.573***	.358***	.41***	-.533***
Personal Hindrance		X	.366***	.221	-.402***
Categorical Facilitation			X	.431***	-.239
Personal Facilitation				X	-.23
Supervisor Competence					X

Note. *** p<.001
** p<.01

Table 3: Correlations Between Variables in the Female Supervisor/Unfavorable Promotion Recommendation Condition

	Categorical Hindrance	Personal Hindrance	Categorical Facilitation	Personal Facilitation	Supervisor Competence
Categorical Hindrance	X	.365***	.281*	.008	-.492***
Personal Hindrance		X	.049	.072	-.386***
Categorical Facilitation			X	.37***	.011
Personal Facilitation				X	.01
Supervisor Competence					X

Note. *** p<.001
** p<.01

Table 4: Correlations Between Variables in the Female Supervisor/Favorable Promotion Recommendation Condition

	Categorical Hindrance	Personal Hindrance	Categorical Facilitation	Personal Facilitation	Supervisor Competence
Categorical Hindrance	X	.613***	.205	.230	-.377***
Personal Hindrance		X	.103	.076	-.279*
Categorical Facilitation			X	.496***	.003
Personal Facilitation				X	-.239
Supervisor Competence					X

Note. *** p<.001
** p<.01

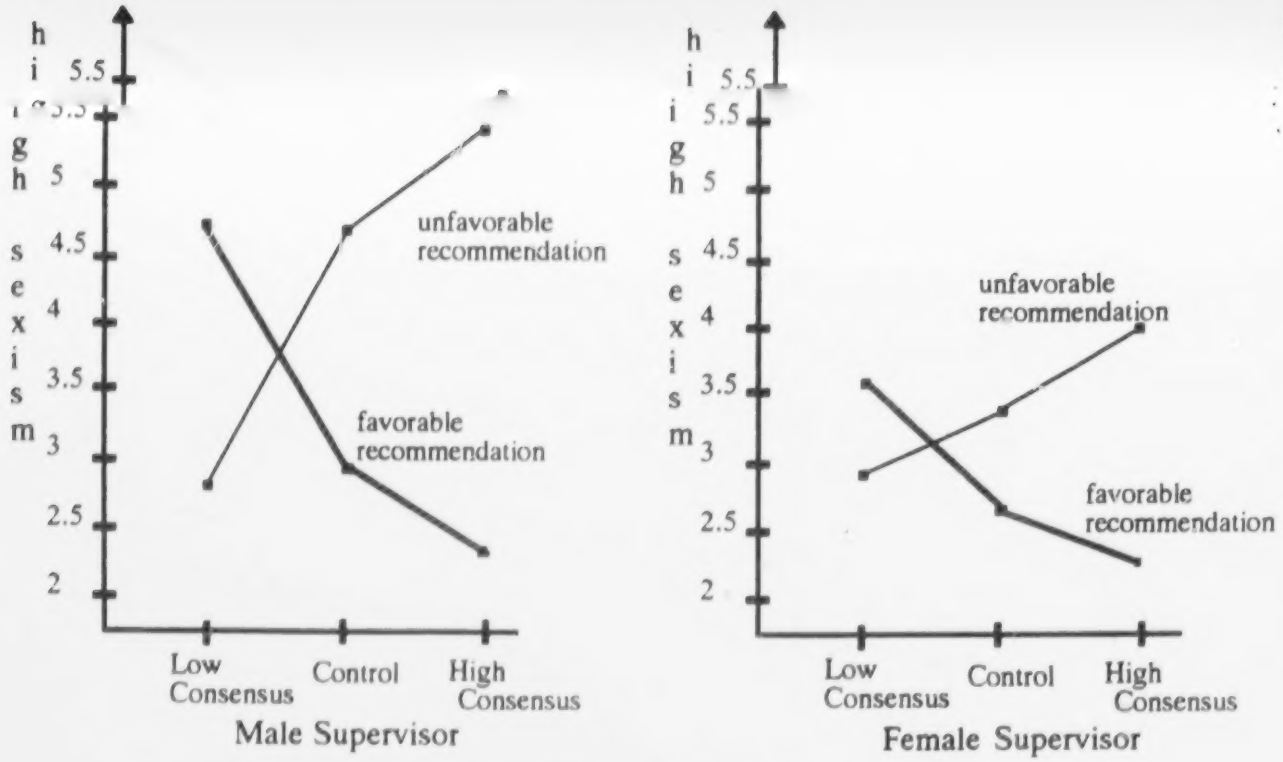

Figure 1: Interaction of Supervisor Gender, Promotion Recommendation and Consensus on Attributed Sexism, $p<.0001$

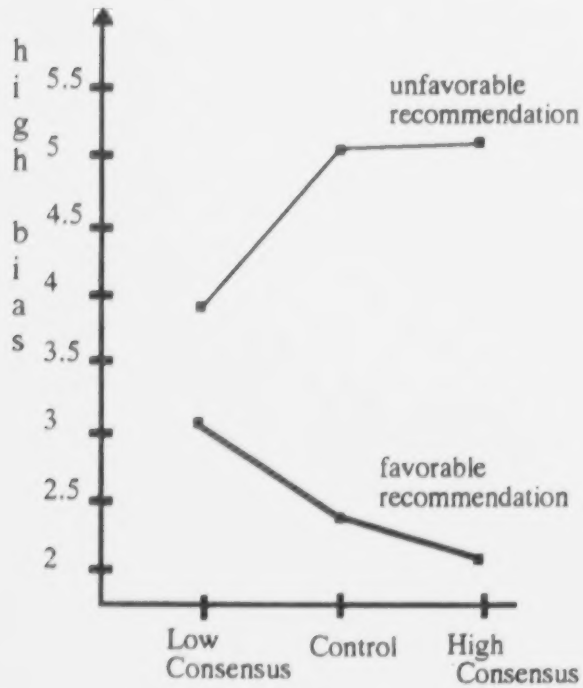

Figure 2: Interaction of Promotion Recommendation and Consensus on Personal Hindrance Bias, $p<.0001$